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ABSTRACT

Introducing Preschool Children to Reading through Parent Involvement is a project funded by a New York State Education Department mini-grant. The major activity of the project is to inform parents of preschool children of the research findings and theories concerning reading to young children. Three newsletters are mailed each year to families identified by school census. Three evening lectures are scheduled, and invitations to speak to parents at various meetings have been accepted. It is the contention of this project that children's inherent language development and the subtleties of the oral-aural act itself make reading aloud to young children the essential ingredient of the beginning reading process. When theoretical questions are asked by parents, the work of psycholinguist Frank Smith is examined for answers. Smith offers two basic assumptions which children must make before they will become readers: children must recognize that print has meaning and that written language is different from speech. The effectiveness of the project will be measured over a period of 5 years by end-of-year testing in first grade. (Author/RH)

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INTRODUCING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN TO READING THROUGH PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Don McKay, Nanuet Public Schools

"Introducing Pre-School Children to Reading Through Parent Involvement" is a project funded by a New York State Education Department mini-grant. It involves schools, parents and children in an attempt to offer language development to young children from the earliest age. There is no magic formula for this development, but rather a return to a basic - that of a loving parent reading aloud to a pre-school child. Along with motherhood, this has been one of our cherished institutions, and few would state negatively as to its benefits or to a lack of participation. But, like other family rituals, in these changing times, reading aloud to young children has suffered. The obvious causes would be increased television viewing and a rise in the number of both the single parent family and the family where the economy has forced both parents to work.

Literature for young children carries our rich language from generation to generation. Through song, rhyme and story, we also offer children our heritage of values and beauty. In so doing, we make the process of learning how to read a much less complicated task. In the pre-school years it is the parent who may bring a child the joys and advantages to be shared in

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literature.

It is the contention of this project that the inherent language development and the subtleties of the oral-aural act itself, make reading aloud to young children the essential ingredient of the beginning reading process. Many parents may not be aware of the pedagogical theory and research leading to this assumption. Therefore, this information is brought to the attention of parents of pre-schoolers with the objective being that they read more to their children. The project seeks to prove that such communication will result in better beginning readers.

It is generally believed that children will be better readers if read to prior to entering school. The studies of Milner (1951), Durkin (1966) and Monroe (1969) support this belief. Monroe concludes in her report:

> "The transition from oral to written language is usually an easy one for children who hear academic English spoken at home and who have been read aloud to since infancy. One of the best predictors of ability to read may prove to be simply the number of books in a child's home and the number of hours a week parents read aloud to their children."

Based on these and other studies, it becomes apparent that reading to young children is beneficial, but the question remains - why? Perhaps if the contributing factors in learning to read can be better understood, a definite theory can be proposed.

On the surface, the initial stages of reading learning seem to be simply a matter of learning letters, their sounds, and the ability to combine these sounds to form words. But if viewed as

a function of language rather than as an entity in itself, this is not the simple act of decoding. It is in the combination of language and the psyche that the process is developed. Reading should be approached as a psycholinguistic act.

The project focuses on the work of psycholinguist Frank Smith for the answers to theoretical questions. He states:

> "Learning to read is a complex and delicate task in which almost all the rules, all the cues, and all the feedback can be obtained only through the process of reading itself. Children learn to read only by reading, therefore the only way to facilitate their learning to read is to make reading easy for them."

Smith goes on to offer two basic assumptions at which children must arrive before they will become readers. It is in examining these assumptions and relating them to the work of other researchers that we can state that the vital factor in learning how to read is the parent-to-child oral reading during the pre-school years.

Smith's first assumption is that children must recognize that "print has meaning." When first being read to, a child receives oral language while observing pictorial messages. Many beginning books, in fact, have no printed words. But later, his stories are written as well as illustrated. When a child adopts a favorite, and insists upon hearing it again and again, he arrives at the conclusion that the speaker has the same message each time. The oral message is not originating from the speaker, but from those "squiggly black lines." Children will often correct adults when their oral renditions stray from previous ones, for they have

memorized the story. Print has meaning. It is those "squiggly black lines" that carry the message.

Parents would do well to occasionally run a finger along the line being read to young children. Phrasing movements, indicating meaning units, may even assist children in hearing and seeing the rhythmic patterns of our written language.

The second of Smith's assumptions is that "written language is different from speech." Although some would state that print is just our spoken words written down, an author of children's books has a chance to change his speech - to add color and rhythm with words, phrases and varied structures. While one might say "The sky is blue today," it might be extended when written: "The sky is perfectly blue today," or "On this day the heavens are showing their finest majestic colors."

Imagine telling a story that you have read - not a practiced story-telling, but just in conversation. In attempting a story having literary merit, it is doubtful that many could come close to the one captured in written form - written and rewritten to offer characterization or mood, but most of all, language.

While one might tell it this way: "There's a little tugboat at the end of the dock. It's really cute with its striped smokestack. But, that little tugboat has hardly any whistle at all," Hardie Gramatky did it this way:

> "At the foot of an old, old wharf lives the cutest, silliest little tugboat you ever saw. A very handsome tugboat with a brand new candy-stick smokestack.
>
> His name is Little Toot. And this name he came by

through no fault of his own. Blow hard as he would, the only sound that came out of his whistle was a gay, small - toot-toot-toot."

And surely a story told in rhyme, such as Madeline, is far different from its original creation:

"In an old house in Paris
that was covered with vines
lived twelve little girls
in two straight lines.
In two straight lines
they broke their bread
and brushed their teeth
and went to bed."

Basil Bernstein classifies oral language as formal and public language. Although he attaches public language to the lower class, there are certain qualities of this speech that are universal in adult language to children. What is more, the language that Bernstein classifies as formal language is the language of literature. It might be helpful to tape our daily language to see where we stand in regard to the characteristics of public language as defined by Bernstein:

'1. Short, grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences with a poor syntactical form.
2. Simple and repetitive use of conjunctions.
3. Little use of subordinate clauses to break down the initial catagories of the dominant subject.
4. Inability to hold a subject through a speech sequence, so

that dislocated informational content is facilitated.

5. Rigid and limited use of adjectives and adverbs.
6. Infrequent use of impersonal pronouns as subjects of conditional clauses or sentences.
7. Frequent use of statements where the reason and conclusion are confounded to produce a categoric statement.
8. A large number of statements/phrases which signal a requirement for the previous speech to be reinforced... This process is termed "sympathetic circularity."
9. Individual selection from a group of idiomatic phrases or sequences will frequently occur.
10. The individual qualification is implicit in the sentence organization: it is a language of implicit meaning.'

One might examine the complexity of prose in children's books to note the application of the Bernstein statement:

"The little train was carrying all these wonderful things to the good little boys and girls on the other side of the mountain. She puffed along merrily. Then all of a sudden she stopped with a jerk. She simply could not go another inch. She tried and she tried, but her wheels would not turn."

The Little Engine That Could

"In the Fall, when the days grew shorter and the nights colder, she watched the first frost turn the leaves to bright yellow and orange and red. She watched the harvest gathered and the apples picked. She watched the children going back to school."

The Little House

And Madeline and the girls "broke their bread" while Little Toot was "scared green" and "hard put" to stay afloat. Mrs. Mallard talks about "bringing up" children and McCloskey describes Michael as he "planted himself" in the center of the road.

Our written language is indeed different from spoken language and along with Smith's other basic assumption, experience in books can bring children this realization. Consequently, parents reading aloud to children makes learning how to read easy.

There are other linguistic factors involved in early parent-to-child reading. Bernstein states that formal language is an "elaborated code," less predictable than its public counterpart. Certainly all language is predictable and redundant. While one may adapt to set family patterns (Take out the ____. Go to ____.), the world of children's literature exposes children to the many styles and patterns of prose and poetry. With much aural experience, children can adapt to the predictability of the written code.

One must note in the literature, the implication of socio-economic factors in early reading. Milner (1951) and Durkin's first study beginning in 1958 indicate such class distinctions. Monroe's mention of "academic English" and Bernstein attaching public language to the lower class would lead one to assume that children of lower socio-economic standing would have more trouble learning how to read. This is, however, not nature but nurture. Two recent studies, the New York State Experimental Prekindergarten Program and the Pennsylvania Quality Assessment, emphasize the positive aspects of parental involvement. In both, higher test scores or ratings were obtained for children from low socio-economic

families and schools when parents participated in activities related to school programs. There are attitudes and positions that can overcome the socio-economic factors related to reading development.

It was from the aforementioned research and theory that the project "Introducing Pre-School Children to Reading Through Parent Involvement" evolved. Basic to the project is the belief that reading aloud to children prior to formal instruction makes learning to read easier. Just how easy will depend upon the quantity and quality of books read.

As previously mentioned, the major activity of the project is to communicate with parents of pre-school children, accenting the research findings and theories involved in reading to young children. The population to be included in the project was identified by a school census. Three newsletters are mailed each year to these families. Three evening lectures were scheduled, and invitations to speak to parents at kindergarten registrations, back to school nights, PTA meetings and afternoon coffee hours have been accepted. The message to parents is kept simple, with emphasis on three topics:

Why reading to young children is necessary

How to read to young children

What to read to young children.

A book list of old and new favorites was compiled from suggestions by parents, librarians, nursery school teachers and reading teachers. The list of just over a hundred titles was mailed with the first newsletter. The emphasis in the selection was literary quality, variety of language patterns, and exposure to our finest authors and illustrators.

With the help of other local grants, project libraries have been established in both the elementary school and the public library. The school lap-book library, housed in the main office, offers accessibility to visiting parents and to children with pre-school siblings.

The project theory is being measured by end of year testing in first grade over a period of five years. Scores from the first two years act as the control. The fourth and fifth years (1982 and 1983) will be the experimental group.

Although the success of the project is to be determined by test results, the responses to date from parents and professionals reflect positive reactions. It is hoped that others will develop similar projects and communicate to parents that reading to young children is much more than an enjoyable experience. Parents aware of the language needs of young children will surely become partners in the teaching of reading.

Our closing for parent and professional meetings is a poem by a friend of children, parents and educators, Leland B. Jacobs.

'My mother read, when I was small,
Of Humpty Dumpty on the wall,
Of Goldilocks, Babar, Bo Peep,
And of a princess deep in sleep,
Of Curious George, and Ping, and Pooh,
And Cinderella, and Boy Blue,
And, oh, so many marvelous folk.
I still can hear the way she spoke
In cadences that, fast or slow,
Or loud or soft, or high or low,

Made all things she was reading of
Something I could know and love -
Something that, in prose or rhyme,
Is my own "Once upon a time."'

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